

“How To” Form Program Evaluation Questions



Forming program evaluation questions is both an art and science.

Essentially, questions are the fabric of a program evaluation project because they improve focus and guide data collection methods, data analysis, and reporting. **The essence of asking a good question leads to the pursuit of a good answer. A few characteristics of a good question are focus, brevity, grammatically correct, and easy to comprehend.**

If you have never formed program evaluation questions, a good start may be to lead an open discussion or a stakeholder meeting. Through open discussions with stakeholders a project manager can learn various interests, concerns, ideas, and feedback about a program. You will not know what stakeholders think unless you ask and then you can figure out commonalities and interests.

A few queries to make before forming evaluation questions:

What information has already been learned from previous research or program evaluations about the related programmatic topic? You don't want to replicate or duplicate existing work. Also, after reviewing other evaluation work, you may identify missing information or gaps, which may lead you in the right direction.

- ❖ Don't just look for information internally, look externally too. Seek to find previous reports by reliable and valid sources such as the Feeding America National Office, and federal departments such as US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), Health and Human Services (HHS), and US Census Bureau, etc. You may also want to consider peer non-profit organizations in your community that may have already conducted research on the topic of interest.

Timing is important. Do you intend to conduct a program evaluation when a major legislative policy is pending a vote, or there is leadership change on the horizon, or new partnerships are being formed, etc.?

- ❖ Don't neglect the influence of environmental factors on an evaluation, especially during periods of uncertainty. Program evaluations involve stakeholders and are influenced by internal and external factors. Consider that evaluation questions are a “call for action” and thus involving stakeholders and collecting data are specific and intentional actions. For instance, if a new leader will take reigns at your organization, he or she may have a vision that will or will not be aligned with a set of program evaluation questions. If federal, state, or local legislation is pending and the result will directly affect program funding, then this should be taken into consideration when forming evaluation questions.

What is the ideal number of evaluation questions for a project?

- ❖ While there isn't a *golden number* for evaluation questions, it is important to consider that too few or too many evaluation questions can impede progress. Too few questions increase the probability of missing information that may be needed to conclude key findings. On the other hand, too many questions increase the probability of gathering too much information, all of which will not be meaningful. Overall, evaluation questions should

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complement one another or create a drill-down effect, a focused path to follow for investigative and analytical actions.

A suggested number for evaluation questions = Two to Five Questions

Keep in mind the goals, complexity and rigor of program evaluation

Examples of Evaluation Questions

Learning about program participants

- **Unfocused and too broad:** Do seniors visiting a food bank suffer from health issues?

Focused: Do female seniors, age 65 and older, who visit the ABC food bank for emergency food assistance, suffer from diabetes? Note: You can focus on either male or females if doing so relates directly to program services.

Learning about staff resources

- **Unfocused and multi-faceted:** Did the allocations from the FY2012 budget, used to fund staff positions for the Backpack program make a difference, and how was staff time used and was it effective?

Simplified and focused: Did funding two new staff positions for the Backpack program lead to overall program growth and improved performance during FY2013? Why or why not?

Note: The question is more specific and focused on investment and return. Program growth can be determined by numerous data indicators so it is important to think about how growth and performance will be measured.

Learning about client knowledge

- **Unclear and too broad:** Did clients learn something new from the program?

Specific and clear: Did new moms learn how to cook at least 3 meals with healthy ingredients discussed during the nutrition education cooking classes they attended between January and March 2013?